

False Prophets: Who are They?



Thrust statement: **False prophets are not necessarily individuals who fail to properly interpret the Scriptures.**

Scripture Reading: **1 John 4:1-3; 1 Corinthians 8; Romans 14:1—15:7^[1]**

INTRODUCTION

As one reflects upon the phrase “false prophets,” one wonders what comes to the minds of most Christians? This expression is frequently employed very loosely among some Christian fellowships. How do you utilize this phrase? Is a false prophet someone who disagrees with your particular brand of orthodoxy? This phrase only occurs seven times in the New Testament.^[2] One objective of this study is to analyze the seven occurrences of this phrase in each of the passages in order to ascertain the proper use of this term. The primary focus of the first installment (**1 John 4:1-3**) of this study is to examine the relationship of understanding to eternal salvation. In other words, is absolute knowledge prerequisite to salvation? Is freedom from error an unquestionable qualification to eternal life? Can one be misguided in his or her interpretation of the Scriptures and still spend eternity with God?

Many Christians tend to confuse their interpretation of Scripture with the Scripture itself. If some believer disagrees with another believer, it is not uncommon for one to designate the other as unsound or a false prophet. As one reads the words *false prophets* in the seven occurrences in the New Testament, one’s presuppositions (assumptions) are frequently read into the Scriptures rather than being read out of the Scriptures. In order for one to interpret these passages correctly, one must unpack the biblical witnesses within the historical settings. It is this factor—our distance from the biblical writers in time and culture—that demands that we become good exegetes, if we are truly to understand the meaning of Scripture. We must wrestle with their use of words, syntax, and literary forms, which express their ideas, and we must hear those ideas within both the author’s cultural contexts and presuppositions, if we are to recognize adequately what they intended by their words.^[3]

Christians often label those who disagree with their perception of the Scriptures as "false prophets." But does the Holy Spirit employ this expression in this manner? How can one determine who is and who is not a false teacher? Is one a sham teacher simply because one believes in instrumental music, handclapping in the assembly, solo singing, Sunday schools, individual communion cups, orphan homes, Bible colleges, and so on? Since Jesus warns against imitation prophets ([Matthew 7:15; 24:11, 24](#)), believers do have a responsibility to identify those who come under this classification. Just how does one recognize a false teacher? Are there any criteria in the Scriptures that can assist one in making this determination?

ONE WHO IS NOT A FALSE TEACHER

1 John 4:1-3

If one can determine who is not a false teacher, then this understanding should help one in deciding who is a true teacher. First, a false teacher is not necessarily someone who disagrees with one's own interpretation of a particular passage of Scripture. In other words, a person who is mistaken is not necessarily a disloyal instructor. For instance, God has never made absolute perfection in knowledge a condition of fellowship with Him or His children. If so, no one could be in a right relationship with God or any one else for that matter. One is not a spurious guide because he or she fails to comprehend some truth that is not a condition for salvation. Just who is a false prophet? What do the Scriptures say? Well, John, the apostle, informs Christians that a false prophet/teacher is one who denies that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. In fact, he writes:

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world ([1 John 4:1-3](#)).

For John, the antichrist or false teacher is one who denies that Jesus has come in the flesh. Is the antichrist one who believes in instrumental music? Is the antichrist one who believes in Sunday school"? Is the antichrist one who sings a solo in the assembly of the saints? As one seeks to unravel the mystery of the antichrist, the words of John are important in making one's determination as to who is and who is not the antichrist. How does John define the word *antichrist*? Is one an evil instructor or a wicked deceiver simply because one does not dot every "i" or cross every "t" in the Word of God exactly as some one else does. If so, every one is condemned. Perfection in knowledge is not a condition of salvation. Imperfection in knowledge does not necessarily mean that one is a false teacher. For example, Paul rebukes the Corinthians for not making allowances for shortcomings in understanding among some believers in the congregation:

Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. But the man who loves God is known by God ([1 Corinthians 8:1-3](#)).

Paul is clearly dealing with insufficient knowledge. Forcefully, the apostle says that no man knows every thing as he ought, but, to the contrary, he does state emphatically that God knows the person who loves God. For Paul, God loves the person with limited knowledge as well as the person with clear insight. With Paul, as long as one loves God—in spite of deficiency in aptitude—this person is acceptable to God. This type person is still known by God, even with incorrect perception. The intent of the heart does play an important role in deciding who is and who is not acceptable to God. Again, Paul continues his line of reasoning with the weak Christian:

So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live. But not everyone knows this (**1 Corinthians 8:4-7a**).

Did Paul condemn these Christians with poverty of insight as false teachers? Does he not say that they are brothers? Paul goes right to the heart of arrogance and pride when he jots down the very heart of one’s relationship to other Christians whose knowledge is far from perfect: “So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ” (**1 Corinthians 8:11-12**). . There are certain principles that one can learn from the above citations from Scripture. For example, all truth is truth, but not all truth is essential to one’s salvation. Another benchmark is, all error is error, but not all error will condemn one’s soul. Paul does not teach that complete truth is prerequisite to redemption nor does he teach that all error will result in loss of salvation. Even though some of the Corinthians did not properly understand the teachings of God about the eating of meats, the keeping of certain holy days, or the nature of idols, yet not once did Paul indict the believers who misunderstood these truths as false teachers. In other words they were not accused of being dishonorable interpreters of the Word.

The general trend today is to equate anyone who differs with the status quo as being a false prophet. No room is made for honest differences if the dissimilarities are not kosher, at least according to some Bible interpreters. Again, this essay calls upon Paul to establish how one should react toward those whose knowledge is deficient in many areas. How did Paul deal with those who wanted to make correct interpretation the criteria by which one determines one’s faithfulness or unfaithfulness to God? For this evaluation, the **Book of Romans, chapters 14 and 15**, is an excellent commentary on Paul’s attitude in this matter of reception and rejection. Paul cogently writes:

Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. One man’s faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand (**Romans 14:1-4**).

Paul did not denounce those who were mistaken in their thinking as being false

teachers or prophets. Some of the Christians were errorless in their thinking, at least in the above issues, and some were wrong? Did Paul advocate throwing the immature out of the synagogue as a means of rectifying inferior knowledge? Did he accuse them of being false teachers? What does Paul mean when he says, “Who are you to judge someone else’s servant” (14:4)? How should one react to variations within the Christian community? Is there a Scripture that articulates this controversy of imperfection in understanding? Yes, Paul writes with exactness in setting forth what God expects of His children: “Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind” (14:5b) This statement cuts away all underbrush of doubt as to the position that Christians should exercise in dealing with diversity within the company of redeemed ones.

Is Paul, once more, admonishing Christians not to enforce their views upon someone else as a test of fellowship? Just what is Paul saying in 14:5b? This verse reads: “Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.” What did this statement mean in the first century? What does this weighty pronouncement mean in the twentieth-first century? Did Paul say, “Each one should be fully convinced in my mind or does he say his or her own mind?” Which is it? Is it my own mind or is it his or her own mind? Almost without exception, certain segments of God’s community interpret this verse with—“my own mine,” not “his or her own mind.”

In chapter 14 of Romans, Paul continues to chide the brethren for passing judgment on others. He puts it graphically as he seeks to stop division dead in its tracts:

For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat (**Romans 14:9-10**).

CONCLUSION

It is not uncommon for some religious journals to frequently judge their brothers and sisters, even though Paul asked the question: “Why do you judge your brother?” Paul wanted this unholy deciding of condemnation against differences to stop. This Scripture is still violated in many fellowships. One still observes, almost on a daily basis, the various subdivisions of certain splinter groups that exercise judgment of ostracism against anyone who does not maintain the status quo—the judging does not stop! Christians under the dominion of opinions have been made, as it were, to hate one another when opinions collide. It is advocated by some: “Agree with the status quo of a particular party, or else face persecution in the form of a write-up in a journal of orthodoxy and, at the same time, castigation from the ‘true’ fold.” If one loves God, God loves this person in spite of weakness or dullness of intellect. Many Christians have forgotten that God is love. One can hardly fail to reflect upon the words of Jesus to Nicodemus when one thinks of God’s love:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son,^f that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of

God's one and only Son ([John 3:16-18](#)).^g

Do you believe this? How can one believe the words of Jesus and, at the same time, believe that God would condemn a person whom He loves because he or she could not apprehend the tortuous interpretation of some passage according to a particular sectarian party. From a quick perusal of [Romans 14](#), one discovers that Paul's discourse on fellowship goes to great length to arrest this judging. In fact, Paul puts pen to paper as he seeks to curb an attitude that is disruptive of the unity for which Jesus prayed: "Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another" ([14:13](#)). Does this principle of not judging apply to the twentieth-first century? Do you judge other Christians? How do Christians go about rejecting the implications of this chapter concerning differences in regard to fellowship? How can you implement this objectivity of toleration for misunderstanding of Scripture into the life of the church for the twentieth-first century? Do you violate Paul's words about judging?

^[1] All Scripture citations are from the *New International Version*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House) 1984, unless stated otherwise.

^[2] Matthew 7:15; 24: 11, 24; Mark 13:22; Luke 6:26; 2 Peter 2:1; 1 John 4:1.

^[3] Gordon D. Fee, *Gospel and Spirit: Issues in New Testament Hermeneutics* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1991), 26.

f Or *his only begotten Son*

g Or *God~s only begotten Son*